

ART. IX.—*The New Britain Currency, or Shell-money.*

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In this introductory paper I must take, almost without option, the Money, or Currency, of the islanders as my subject, for it is impossible to say much of these people without frequent reference to it.

The New Briton does not merely make money to live, which he must do or die, but he lives to make money. This is true not only of his fishing, planting, canoe-cutting, ornament-making, and of the various employments of his every-day life, but of his fighting and quarrelling, his witchcraft (both offensive and defensive), and of his very recreations—his feasts, his dances, and his secret associations or clubs. He can never get a wife without it, and to be buried without it is to become an evil spirit.

Many customs have their origin in it, *e.g.*, borrowing and lending, pawning, most of the charm-making, besides most of those above named. Hence it will readily be seen that it is necessary that we should know what this money is, before we speak on any of these subjects.

On the Gazelle Peninsula, which is the more important and more populated part of the island, it is called “tabu;” and on the Duke of York Islands, which are twenty miles away, it is called “diwara.” It consists of small sea shells of the *Nassa* genus, which are about $\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length, and proportionately thick. The back is clipped off so as to make an aperture through the shell. These shells are then strung or threaded closely and firmly in a uniform position on pared strips of cane, or a split vine, about the size of half of an ordinary straw. The latter is used only when the shell is new and the apertures rough and liable to catch on the fibres of the cane. In either case, it is first threaded on short pieces varying from twelve to twenty inches in length, and these are joined by splitting one end of one piece of the cane or vine, and pointing one end of another; the point

of the one is inserted into the split of the other, and shells drawn tightly over the other to hold it fast. In order to draw the shells tightly over the joint, the operator, as he sits, presses his heel on the opposite end of the piece which is split, and then draws the shells one by one towards him. When thus threaded and joined, it is measured off in fathoms and coiled. It is measured by stretching it from extended hand to hand across the chest, so as to make from five to six feet, according to the length of the man's arms. If it be a large quantity belonging to one person, it is generally put aside in coils of ten of these measurements called "pokono," and which for convenience the whites call "fathoms."

A peculiarity of this shell is, that it is not found in any of the localities where it is used as money, but only in a district on the North coast, known as Nakanai, and extending from one hundred to two hundred miles from here, and probably on to New Guinea. The natives gather the shells along the mangrove coast, to the roots of which trees they are found clinging; they collect them and tie them up in pandanus leaves, or the stipule of the betel palm, in sufficient quantities to make from three to six fathoms of "tabu." These parcels are exchanged to the natives of the Gazelle Peninsula for European trade—native ornaments or a kind of native money called "pele" which is made on Mioko, a small island of the Duke of York Group. This "pele" is made of pieces of white or lavender-coloured shell, drilled and strung on cocoanut fibre, then ground round to about the size of telegraph wire, and made up in lengths of from nine to twelve inches. At Nakanai, the "tabu" shells are used extensively for edging collars, armlets, anklets, and other ornaments; for making necklaces, head-dresses, and for ornamenting spears; but they sell much more than they use. The natives of the French Islands, which are nearly one hundred miles away to the North, are largely ornamented with these shells, which they obtain from Nakanai through trading expeditions. Some of these shell ornaments are found amongst the natives of the German Protectorate of New Guinea, but we cannot say whence they procure them. The shells when used for ornaments have more of the back chipped off than when used for "tabu," so as to make them flat; they have also two apertures to admit of being sewn on to ornaments. The natives of the Gazelle Peninsula also use a little of this kind of shell on collars and girdles.

When new, the "tabu" shell is of a dark colour, and strange as it may appear, the people on this side of the island, and on the Duke of York Islands, refuse to accept it as money. The coin new from the mint is repudiated in favour of the old and worn. However, we have not to look far for the explanation. The "tabu" comes from a great distance, and in the past, when communication was more difficult and less frequent than it is now, it was obtained here after it had passed from one person to another, from village to village, and from district to district, being probably years on the way, by which time it had become white, and until late years the people on the East Coast, and on Duke of York never saw the dark kind. The conservative nature of natives is not easily reconciled to anything which is different from that of their fathers. In fact, the most frequent and conclusive argument they use is "It was always so," implying "and it must always be so." White traders have tried in vain to whiten the new shell with chemicals. The "tabu" is worth much more here than it is at any of the places nearer its source, for passing through so many hands, it necessarily becomes dearer. If the traders could whiten the new shell, which they can buy cheaply at Nakanai, so as to pass it here, it would be very remunerative.

To witness the uses and advantages of the "tabu," let us first visit the market. This is either on the beach or on the boundary of two districts, at an appointed place, where the people of two or more small districts meet every third day to buy and sell. Here the women begin to assemble early in the morning, bringing with them burdens more suitable for horses than for human beings—baskets of taro, yam, or betel nut, coils of cane, and various other articles, which they carry on their backs, suspended by a strap passed over their heads. Those who arrive first sweep the grassless market-place, making it perfectly clean, for reasons which will appear in our paper on witchcraft. Soon the place is crowded with (in some instances) hundreds of men and women. The latter sit or squat down with their baskets, and spread out their taro or yams in sixes for sale. Their chatter is almost deafening, while they do a little trading among themselves. The men are standing about in little groups, some talking or joking boisterously, others speaking in a low voice, giving and receiving private commissions most secretly. Two old friends or business acquaintances meet, one of whom takes a bit of "tabu," about an inch

long, and containing eight shells, out of his basket, which he always carries under his arm, and turning to one of the women, buys a parcel containing four or five betel nuts and about a dozen pepper berries, then the friends have a social chew instead of "a social glass." Here are women buying six yams, or six taro, for a piece of "tabu" six inches in length, or forty shells. There is a man with a large fish and a string of small ones, he does not exchange them for yams or taro, but gets half a fathom for the former, and a quarter for the latter, then with part of it he buys his taro and a few parcels of betel nut, enough to last till next market-day, and returns home with the balance in his basket. Yonder is a woman selling lime in little bags of pandanus leaves sewn together, she gets eight shells for each bag. There is another selling eight ripe bananas for seven shells, and cooked taro for six shells each. Here is another selling puddings made of nuts and taro, or young taro leaves cooked in cocoanut milk, at the rate of seven shells per parcel. This man has bought a small packet of parrot feathers for dance decorations or fancy spears, and has given twenty shells for it. So we might note many similar transactions. A roll of cane for fish-trap making, for half a fathom; a fancy spear adorned with feathers, for three-quarters of a fathom. All this we have seen, but we have heard much more. One man pays a deposit on an unborn pig or dog. The beach-man hands his European trade over to a bushman to sell on commission, and the latter bargains with the former to sell his cassowary, or cockatoo, for a commission also. We hear them giving orders and making appointments. How strange it is to hear them calling ten shells five, and eight four, and so with all the numbers. Yes, but it is the custom with "tabu," but with "tabu" only. We hear the names for the various lengths of "tabu," viz., *a tip*, for any amount up to ten shells; *a tip na arip*, twenty shells; *a waratuk*, forty shells; *a bal*, eighty shells, or a quarter of a fathom; *a papara*, a half fathom; *a pokono*, a fathom; *a vuna em tabu*, two fathoms; *a gaina*, three fathoms; *a arip*, ten fathoms. (These names vary in the different districts.)

Now let us go with a trading party from this town to a distant one. See what keen traders these people are. One has brought a stock of betel nut which he bought at the rate of eight shells, to sell again for twelve or eighteen. Another has bought a sucking pig for two fathoms, to sell

for four or five. This man has acquired print and tobacco for his cocoanuts, or his labour, and now comes here to turn them into money—the former for half its length in “tabu,” and the latter for its full length in “tabu.”

Next, let us follow the trading expedition to a more distant locality. The party numbers about thirty men in five canoes, and are armed with spears and slings, and possibly a rifle or two. The object of their trip is to turn larger articles into money. One buys a canoe for ten fathoms, to sell at home for twenty or more; another buys opossums' teeth for European trade, or at the rate of fifty or sixty shells per hundred, to sell at the rate of one and a half fathoms per hundred; another buys tortoise-shell with a little trade or “tabu,” with which to buy a supply of trade for his next expedition. Another buys a slave for four or five fathoms, and sells him, or her, for double the amount, or more; or perhaps the party has been successful in pouncing upon a few unsuspecting men, women, or children shell-fishing on the reef, whom they carry off as slaves. When we have added that a large pig is worth ten fathoms, a woman (for all wives are bought) from ten to thirty fathoms, and that whites readily buy the “tabu” at two shillings per fathom, we shall have a fair notion of its value.

When compared with other mediums of exchange, or of exchanging produce for produce, how convenient the “tabu” is! Compare a New Briton going to buy a wife with twenty fathoms doubled up in a basket under his arm, with the Banyai (Africa) mustering a little herd of cattle or goats, and driving them off to the home of his father-in-law elect. Or compare him with the Marshall Islander, whose money is a large rock with a hole through it, weighing upwards of half a ton, and which is put down near his house, and perhaps never removed, however often it may change owners. How conveniently and accurately divisible is the “tabu!” You may break it off at any length by holding it short and twisting it. It is capable of being lent and returned in exact quantities. It is neither liable to diminution by use, nor admits of counterfeit. It keeps its value because the supply is limited. It is a universal equivalent for all commodities, and everything that is capable of being transferred in commerce has a known money value, even the recently introduced European trade.

The great disadvantage of the "tabu" is its destructibility by fire, to which native houses are so liable. Recently several coils, probably amounting to a thousand fathoms, were destroyed in one house near our home.

It will be evident from what has been said, that the tendency of trade is to cut up the "tabu" into very small pieces. That which has been much used is full of joints, sometimes with only three or four inches between. This, and all the smaller pieces, are re-threaded on new cane, and all "tabu" that is put by is that which has been re-threaded. When a man finds that he has more than he needs for his ordinary business purposes, and enough to make a roll of one hundred or two hundred fathoms, he makes a hoop of cane with fern leaves twisted around it, to which several lengths of "tabu" are bound, and others added till a large coil is made. These coils vary in size from two to five feet in diameter, but the ordinary size is from two to three feet in diameter, and from eight to ten inches thick. These contain from one hundred to two hundred fathoms. They are most convenient in the event of fire or quarrels, the women quickly put their heads through them and run off with them. Persons making up large quantities of "tabu" have private marks, *e.g.*, one threads the claw of a crab, or part of a tentacle of a lobster, or a sea shell on every few fathoms; or instead of threading all the faces of the shells the same way, he threads a small piece here and there through the whole, with the shells face to face, or every second couple face to face. About the locality of our home, it is commonly believed that a certain chief, To Kaiya by name, has become wealthy through witchcraft. Thus, he puts aside shells enough to make up four or five fathoms, then with certain ceremonies, which of course he keeps secret, it increases to ten fathoms. These coils are wrapped up in pandanus leaves, or in the stipule of the betel-palm, or in banana leaves enclosed in nicely plaited cane.

There is an evident danger here, as in other countries, of money being locked up in the hands of the wealthy; but the danger here is greater, as these people have fewer wants, and can almost, if not quite, supply them all from their own plantations, or by the labour of their wives and menials. But there are certain customs, the principal purpose of which appears to be, to keep the money in circulation. To fully describe these would lead us within the scope of future papers, *e.g.*, marriage and funeral ceremonies, but it will be

sufficient for our present purpose to merely name them :— (1) At every funeral, every man, woman, and child has a little given to them. If it be the funeral of a wealthy man, the amount given to chiefs is from two to three fathoms, to other adults a quarter to half a fathom, and to lads an eighth to a quarter. (2) All the women present at a birth get a little “tabu,” according to the wealth of the father, from two to five fathoms. (3) A marriageable young man is caught, and held down while “tabu” is distributed to the spectators. (4) The poor man, who has been beggared to buy his wife, has a few fathoms given him by his wife’s relatives, first for “house-warming,” and afterwards at the birth of the first child. As we consider native customs, we shall see that a man is compelled by public opinion to give, if he has it to give, or can borrow it. Truly there is “nothing for nothing” in this country, but anything and everything for “tabu.” It will buy a person out of any difficulty ; an adulteress may buy her life for less than ten fathoms ; a few fathoms will secure the death of an adult by secret murder, and less than that by witchcraft ; and ten fathoms will make a whole tribe an ally in war.

There are no born chiefs here ; money alone constitutes a chief, but of course, some are born wealthy, and in that way may be said to be born chiefs. Wealth is power. A young man borrows from a chief either for his marriage or his initiation into one of the clubs or secret societies, and until the debt with interest is paid he is a vassal to the chief, to run on messages, to dig his land, to paddle his canoe, or fight in his battles. A man who has plenty of “tabu” can buy soldiers by the tribe as long as it lasts. On state occasions it is exhibited, and for this purpose coils of “tabu” are hired for the occasion.

Two thousand fathoms may be said to constitute a millionaire, and these are not more numerous than in European countries. But wealthy misers are more numerous by far than among Europeans—men who are mean, and who live miserably, for no apparent purpose other than that of dying rich.
